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Justice Court reaps increase

By Steven Wallis
Vernal Express Editor

In 1998 the Uintah County Justice Court collected $49,000 more in fines and warrants than the year prior, but still the court is not a money-making endeavor.

Judge Jody Petry reported to the Uintah County Commission Tuesday that in 1998 the court had $335,138.92 in total collections.

"Collections are up because there is more crime and people are being held more accountable," said Judge Petry. During the year the court collected $2,752 in restitution of which $2,164.40 was distributed to victims of crimes.

"It is important to collect restitution," said Judge Petry. "It helps people feel whole again. I would like to see people pay more, but I have to take into consideration people's ability to pay."

While the amount of collections is up, the total number of cases filed and disposed is down from 1997.

A concern of Judge Petry is the increase in the number of alcohol consumption violations by minors. Last year there were 90 cases of minors with alcohol, compared to 57 in 1997.

"A lot of young people do not believe that it is a problem to possess alcohol, when it can be a gateway to other things."

In such cases, Judge Petry said usually a 48-hour stay in jail will leave such an impression that the person is less likely to do it again.

Accomplishments of the Justice Court in 1998 include placing Uintah County's warrants on the state-wide warrants list. Before August of 1998, a person wanted on a warrant from Uintah County would only be arrested in the Uintah Basin. Now those wanted on warrants from Uintah County are being picked up throughout the State of Utah. Also the court has reduced a $44,000 outstanding warrant list by hiring a full-time court services officer, who follows up on the warrants. The new officer, Jayson Newman, was hired a little over a year ago on a trial basis.

"Being on the state-wide warrants has been a great help," Newman said.

A man was recently picked up in St. George on a $300 warrant which he paid rather than being transported back to Uintah County.

Judge Petry sees part of her job as an educator. "If people understand what it is, they do better at swallowing whatever pill."

If a fine is not paid, a yellow card is sent out. "I don't believe in issuing a warrant right off the bat."

In 1999 Judge Petry hopes to become involved in more education, especially with young people who might become involved with alcohol. She would also like to develop a people's rights video.

"It is amazing what people do if they know they have to be responsible," Commissioner Herb Snyder said.

Commissioners stated they were concerned about the state's 85 percent surcharge on all moving violations. From the percent the state takes out, $88,097 in 1998, the court receives little in return, noted commissioners.

On Division of Wildlife violations the state takes its 85 percent and DWR received 85 percent of what is left. On a $185 wildlife fine, Uintah County would receive $15.

"We cannot afford to continue to lose money," said Commissioner Snyder.

The Justice Court is located in Room 104 of the Uintah County Building, 147 East Main.

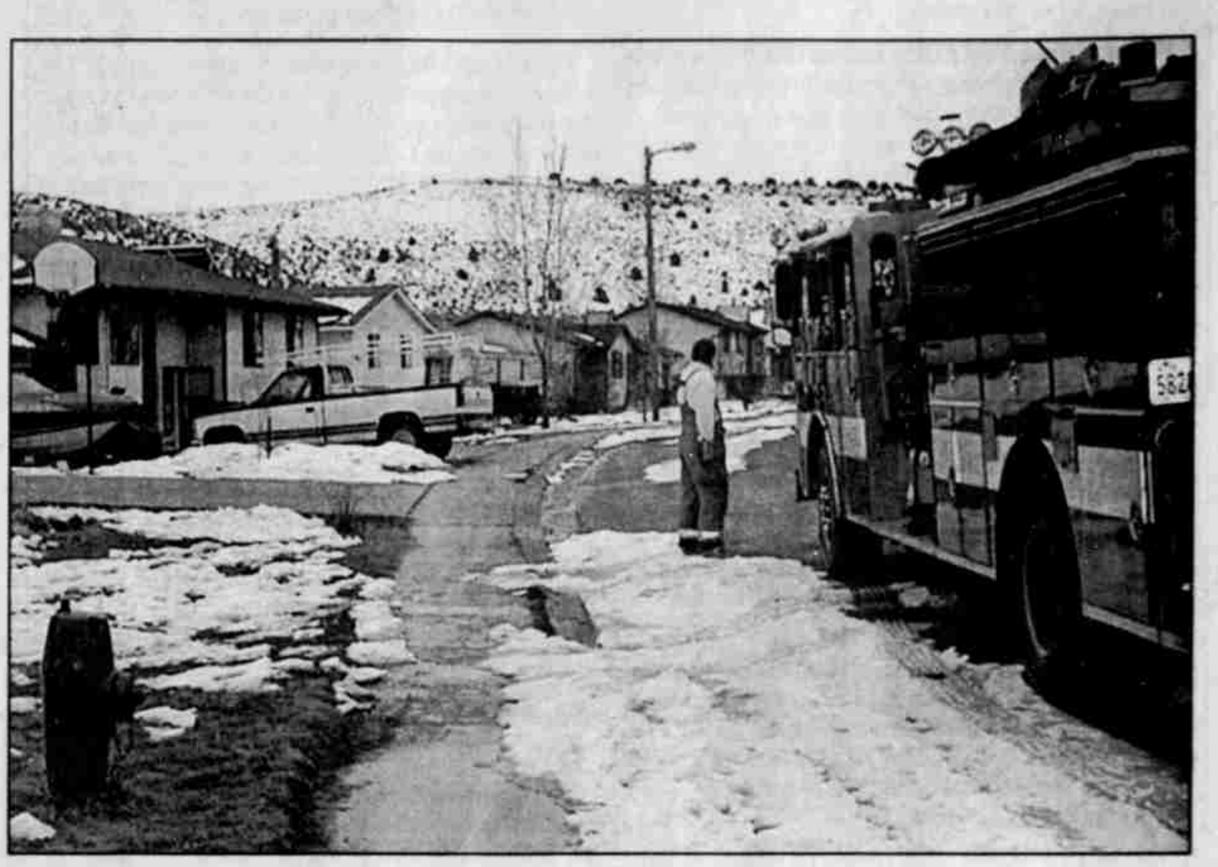
Although most of charges in Justice Court are cleared with bail forfeitures (never seeing the judge), a person has the right to enter a plea during an arraignment. If a not guilty or no contest plea is rendered during the arraignment, the judge can hear an explanation.

Sometimes after taking a guilty or no contest plea and hearing the explanation the judge will decide that what was done was justified and dismiss your case without any punishment. If a not guilty plea is entered, the judge will set the case for a pretrial.

In 1998, 3,632 charges were resolved without seeing the judge, 1,137 charges involved guilty pleas, 89 were bench trial convictions and 12 were bench trial acquittals.

There were 1,268 charges dismissed in 1998. There were no jury trials in the Uintah CountyJustice Court in 1998. Although four were set for jury trial, they were settled before the trial date.

See page 3 for a compilation of Justice Court statistics for 1998.



Uintah County/Vernal City Fire Crews were busy Monday checking the capacity of the fire hydrants in Ashley Valley. Most were functional and had adequate pressure. The survey is necessary for insurance purposes.

Oil producers hit with losses

The results of an informal survey of independent oil producers show multi-million dollar revenue losses, employee lay-offs numbering into the triple digits and exploration of new oil reserves at almost a dead stop, reports the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States.

"These results are undeniable evidence of the massive change now underway across the American West," said Karyn Grass, IPAMS executive director. "We have written reports of what's happening with 35 independent companies. If you multiply these numbers by the thousands of companies now operating in the country — the devastation caused by plummeting oil prices is staggering."

The 35 companies responding to the IPAMS survey reported:

— Revenue losses since Jan. 1 estimated at almost $2.5 million per month.

— Exploration budget slashed by $135.6 million in 1999.

— 144 layoffs since Jan. 12, 1998; 58 more layoffs expected in 1999.

— 1,131 marginal wells prematurely shut-in in 1998. 491 more shut-ins expected in 1999.

— Anticipated oil production reductions due to well shut-ins estimated at 777,796 barrels in 1999.

Thirty-five small to mid-size independent companies responded to IPAMS unscientific survey between Dec. 1, 1998 and Jan. 8, 1999. Not all companies answered in all survey categories.

IPAMS survey results parallel a recent report by the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission. According to the IOGCC report, nearly 11,000 jobs were lost in the oil and natural gas sector in 1998. That estimate does not include the devastating fourth quarter. The report also cites a recent study that found a group of large independents posted a combined loss of $854.4 million in the first half of 1998, compared with a profit of $2.02 million for the first six months of 1997.

For the first six months of 1998, an estimated 48,702 wells were idled or shut in the U.S. If these wells are plugged, this represents an increase of 142 percent over 1997.

Utah gas prices continued a downward spiral to reach a 10-year low, AAA Utah reported today.

"Utah gas prices now average under a dollar for the first time in five years and are at the lowest price in 10 years," said AAA Utah spokeswomen Rolayne Fairclough.

The Utah average is 96 cents for a self-serve gallon of regular unleaded, down 8 cents from last month, according to AAA Utah's monthly gas survey.

The last time prices were this low was in January 1989, when the Salt Lake area average was 95 cents a gallon, according to figures from the Utah State Office of Energy and Resource Planning.

Local averages for regular unleaded self-serve gasoline are: Ogden, 97 cents (down four cents from December 17); Provo, 96 cents (down 12 cents); and Salt Lake City, 94 cents (down 6 cents), according to AAA Utah.

Utah's prices are 2 cents lower than the national average of 98 cents, which fell four cents from last month, according to AAA. A year-long global oversupply of oil has brought down crude prices, causing lower gas prices throughout the country. Demand is lower because of weak economic conditions in parts of the world. Oil supplies are high from overproduction, analysts say.

"There's nothing on the horizon to drive oil prices significantly upward," said Alan Kovski of The Oil Daily, a Washington D.C. based newsletter.

"Not even recent military conflicts in the Persian Gulf stirred much reaction among oil traders," Kovski said.

"The oil markets get used to these tensions," Kovski said. "Markets get dull when traders realize these things don't cause much of a disruption of oil."

Since last month, gas prices in northern California are down by an average of a penny a gallon to $1.15. Nevada gas prices are down two cents to $1.12 a gallon in the same period, according to AAA.

AAA Utah serves more than 100,000 members with an array of travel, automotive, insurance and financial services.

Ft. Duchesne man fined $1,990 for poaching elk

A Ft. Duchesne man will pay $1,990 in restitution to the Ute Tribe after pleading no contest in U.S. District Court Monday to one count of hunting on tribal land without a tribal permit, a violation of federal law.

Perry Von Murdock, 30, entered the plea before U.S. District Judge David Sam.

The charge stems from a Sept. 29, 1997 incident on the Ute Indian Reservation. Murdock was apprehended with a six-point bull elk in his possession. He did not have a tribal hunting permit.

This is the second time Murdock has been charged with hunting on tribal land without a permit. In October 1993, Murdock was caught with a five-point elk in his possession on the Ute Reservation. He pled no contest to that charge and was ordered to pay a $200 fine and serve probation. This case was appealed to the U.S. Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals where the defendant argued he was a descendant of a "mixed-blood Ute" and had a special right to hunt on the reservation. The federal appeals court rejected the argument and ruled that Murdock was obligated to comply with Ute Tribe wildlife laws when hunting on tribal land. In October of last year, the United States Supreme Court refused to accept the case for consideration.

Murdock committed his second hunting offense after the Tenth Circuit had ruled against his appeal on his first case.

"We're hoping the fine assessed Mr. Murdock today sends a strong message to him and others who may be tempted to try to circumvent trial hunting laws," U.S. Attorney Paul Warner said Monday.

"My office works closely with tribal wildlife officials and will continue to support aggressive enforcement of these laws, which will include prosecuting those who decide to disregard them."

VERNAL
CITY

Only a year and a half old, the Vernal City Web page has received over 3,900 visitors.

Planner urges businesses to go online

"It's the way many will be doing business in the future," said Russell Pearson, Vernal City Planner.

In a presentation to the Vernal Area Chamber of Commerce, Pearson urged Vernal businesses to look at the Internet as a way to expand their business.

Pearson has overseen the development of a Vernal City Web page which has seen over 3,900 hits or visitors since it was placed on the Internet a year and a half ago.

The city's web page contains agenda's and meeting times, ordinances, public notices and minutes.

Pearson used the expertise of Brent Simmons and Robin Rosenlund, seniors at Uintah High School, to design the page. Rosenlund is a Sterling Scholar in computer science from Uintah High.

"I pretty much turned it over to a couple of students who have maintained the page," said Pearson.

Pearson suggested that Vernal businesses need to "link" their pages to related Web pages on the state and national level. A bed and breakfast should tie into a statewide directory of bed and breakfasts. Pearson said that one bed and breakfast in the state receives 90 percent of its business from the Internet.

The Vernal City page is located at www.easilink.com/~vernplan.

Pearson said there are many Internet providers in Vernal who can show businesses how to get on the Web.

Farmers set eye on future

With the 1998 Year of the Farmer now history, the Utah Farm Bureau is still challenged by those who have a misconception of the farmer's role.

In his speech at the annual dinner of the Utah Farm Bureau, Ken Ashby, Utah Farm Bureau president, says the world sees farmers in two lights: feeding the world or fouling the earth.

Many of the projections of massive over population, population explosion and mass famine by "extreme environmentalists" have been proven false, Ashby said.

There has also been a believed loss of farmland. However, Ashby said that in 1945 the percent of farmland in the U.S. was 24 percent and in 1992 the percent of farmland was 24 percent. "The massive urbanization which is gobbling up farmland is not happening," he said. "If that were the case, the price of farmland would be going up." The annual increase in urban land from 1974 to 1998 was 1 percent.

"Croplands have shifted in the Pacific states, but in the cornbelt and mountain areas it has increased. My contention is we are a long way away from reaching our capacity to produce crops," he said.

In New York over 100,000 acres of land, which once produced crops, has been converted to wooded areas.

"I believe if there was a need in agriculture, these lands would be put back into crops," he said. "The way to sustain agriculture is the make it profitable."

One of the first ways to help agriculture be more profitable is to rewrite the Endangered Species Act, Ashby suggested. "The Act has a dismal record of failure," he said.

Ken Ashby, president Utah Farm Bureau

Of the 60 species delisted under the Act, 12 were delisted because they became extinct, 24 were delisted because of data error, 9 were on federal lands and would have been saved without the Act, 12 were saved by private conservation groups and three were saved by a ban on DDT.

"To spends billions on this Act doesn't make sense," he said. "The Act should be rewritten so it doesn't punish private property owners, but gives them an incentive to have endangered species on their land."

In order for farmers to survive in the future, Ashby recommended that they become the best managers they can by adapting to change, be open to new ideas, network, be creative, don't view themselves as victims, become risk managers, think more about the "what ifs" and work harder at communicating.

"Our concern is that people know that food is not grown on the shelf of a store."

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